

Interview with Charlie Smith, Bartow, Florida, March 17, 1975

AFS t17,510

Interview with Charlie Smith, Bartow, Florida, March 17, 1975

Elmer Sparks: Ready? The following is an interview between Elmer Sparks, Texas ranchman and historian, and, with Charlie Smith, old-time slave of Bartow, Florida. Uh, [*voices in the background, background noise will remain throughout the interview*] we've already got on the introduction on it.

Charlie Smith: O.K.

Elmer Sparks: Is it turning?

Charlie Smith: Yes.

Elmer Sparks: Uh, Mr. Smith, what is your full name?

Charlie Smith: Charlie Smith.

Elmer Sparks: Charlie Smith.

Charlie Smith: The man that raised me name me Charlie Smith. My first name, first name what my mother name me, is Mitchell, Mitchell Watkins. That's what my mother and father name me, Mitchell Watkins. I was raised in that, uh, born in Africa. And come to the United States. You see that was in slavery time. They sold the colored people. They sold the colored people. And they bringing them from the Africa. And they brought me from Africa. I was a child, a boy. The colored folks want to throw me off the boat coming from Africa. "Throw him overboard!" I was in cuffs. "Throw him overboard, let the damn whale swallow him like he done Jonah." Hadn't have been, the colored one want to throw me off, hadn't have been for L. and the Captain of the boat. L. was a white man and the Captain of the boat was a white man, but the colored is the one wants to throw me off the boat. And D. J., when they bring him from Africa, Liberia Africa, where I was brought from. And put in the United States. Me know, the northern people bought colored folks, put you up on a block and sell you, bid you off. The highest bidder gets you. Highest bidder gets you. Well the northern people bought colored folk and the South bought colored folks. And the northern people didn't carry you with them, colored people to the North. Say that it was too cold for them you know to stand the cold. But they got southern white folks, they got southern white folks to look after them, and they pay the uh, colored, the white folks, southern white folks to look after them. And they got to mistreating them, so. And they come down, the North to the South, first fought a war to free the colored. North

and South fought a war. And that was slavery time. And freedom [*unintelligible*]. I ain't reading for it because I couldn't read. I knowed when it was done. And the man they put you up on a block to sell you, to bid you off. And when they come down here and freed them, they bought the, the North bought the whole state of Louisiana and give it to the colored people for their territory. And make the laws and rules their selves. And the colored people sold their rights, sold out to the white, sold to white. And that freed them, and the North freed them. The North and South fought a war, the first war it was in the United States, North and South fought a war that, that freed the colored people from slavery time. I ain't read for it because I couldn't read. I know it because I raised through it. The colored, the colored people always did hate me from a child. Bringing me from Africa, the colored want to throw me off the boat. "Throw him overboard," cuss. Throw him overboard." Let the, cuss, let the [*Elmer Sparks interrupts*]

Elmer Sparks: Now how did, how did you come to be on the block, get out and brought over here? Was you brought over by surprise?

Charlie Smith: Yeah, they, they, they brought me over here. The, the, the, the North, the people, sold the colored people.

Elmer Sparks: Did they trick you to get you on the boat?

Charlie Smith: What? They fool you on the boat. They fool the colored people on the boat. I ask my mama could I go down to the boat landing to see that white man. I was raised in Galina, Africa. That was in Africa.

Elmer Sparks: Yeah.

Charlie Smith: That's where I was [gotten?] raise, born at, in Africa.

Elmer Sparks: Yeah.

Charlie Smith: And the white folks, didn't no white people stay in Africa, south part of Africa.

Elmer Sparks: Yeah.

Charlie Smith: They stayed in the north part of Africa. And that where they sold the colored people, in the south part of Africa. They put you up on a block and bid you off. And the way they got us on the boat, he said, "Come right in here!" That what they said. "Come in here! Colored in here, all the colored. Over in that country, you don't have to work. If you get hungry, all you got to do go to the fritter tree." Had the fritter tree on the boat, claim that the fritter tree. "You go to the fritter

tree." Same thing now we hear people call in the United States, call them pancakes, they call them flitters. And them flitter tree, bore the, the tree bore the flitters, they claim. "Here the flitter tree. It's on the boat." We got on. Carried show us the fritter tree on the boat. "Come on down here!" Called the lower deck on the, on the called the flitter tree. Then he show us the syrup tree. "Here the syrup tree," and it was on the boat, too. "Come on down here!" And the hole on the lower deck on the boat, they keep calling the hatch hole. "Come on down here in that hatch hole!" They showed us something down there. Got down in the hatch hole, we should have felt the boat moving, but we thought we was going back up there to the fritter tree. And they are leaving. And when it landed, it landed in New Orleans. That where the colored people was sold at. Sold. They bringing us from Africa over here, the colored folks want to throw me off. "Throw him overboard, throw him overboard." And the white, Mr. J., Mr. J. say, "Don't you throw tat boy out there!" "Throw him overboard! Goddam, let the damn whale swallow him like he done Jonah." That what they said. Going to throw me off the boat, bringing me from Africa in the United States. That was when we had the slavery. Just put you on the block and sell you. Put you on a stage, but well they called it a block. Put you up on a stage. Than man would buy you. The highest bidder gets you. Bid on you. *[Elmer Sparks and Charlie Smith overlap]*

Elmer Sparks: I've heard of that.

Charlie Smith: The highest bidder gets you. He'll carry you to his plantation. Put another one up there. Me highest bid, which ever one bid, gives the most, he'll carry him to his plant, that the white, in the South. And they went to mistreating the, the colored. Getting children by the colored women. And all such as that, getting colored. And the white find it out, how they was treating them. They hurt them. And they come down here, the first war ever was in the United States was the North and South fought a war to free the colored.

Elmer Sparks: And who was it that bought you? Do you remember who bought you?

Charlie Smith: Bought me?

Elmer Sparks: Yeah.

Charlie Smith: Oh. I was in, in uh, when they went to New Orleans, that's where they sold the people. The man that raised me, he didn't buy me. The man raised me. They would try to put you up on the block to sell you. He was Jake. The man was Jake. He name me. that's the name I go in now. Charlie Smith. He name me. When he, uh, I uh when he took me. He raised me, in Texas, Galveston, Texas where I was raised in. And the man that raised me, he name Charlie Smith, and that's the name he give me. He gave me Charlie Smith. And always teach me and his children. He treated me just like

he treated his children, in everything, not one thing, everything. We ate together, we slept together. All the boys now, we just talking not about the women now. All we the boys slept together. I was, uh, raised with a cattleman. Charlie Smith raised me. He had all kind of cattle. And all of us toted pistols and something to shoot. And I was the only colored cowboy. I got on a cowboy shirt now that I brought from Texas. Been have it all of my days. I was raised up a cowboy. I was the only cowboy [record skips], colored cowboy he had, was in Texas. His name was Charlie Smith. And he always teach me and his children, anything you got to have don't never let it give out. He say, "And enjoy your money when you living. You can't carry none of it with you when you dead." He said millionaires die and leave all they got. Everything they got, they ain't carry nothing with them. And that, his name was Charlie Smith and he name me Charlie Smith. And he always told me don't change my name. And when he died, all us, he had three, uh, three or four of them, [unintelligible]. He didn't put no money in no bank. He had these little old money safes. People tell me, people got them now in some places, in the house, you know. He had two, two in the drugstore, in the dry goods store, and two in the grocery store. That made four. That where he kept his money and all us cowboys' money, what we didn't tote. We, all cowboys wore boots. Half a leg boots, knee, what they call knee boots that come clean to your knees. Well, we toted our, what he didn't keep for us, we toted in our boots. And I was the only colored cowboy he had. All the rest of them white. We toted pistols and rifles. We carried them, we carried them. We killed bears and panthers and things like that, what was eating up the stock. He was a cattleman. He had plenty of cattle. And all them animals, bears and panthers and things like that and lions, they'd eat up the little pigs and real young stuff. That's what [we makes (?)], the cowboys was carrying their pistols and rifles, to kill them.

Elmer Sparks: Now what did you do after the slaves were free? After you was with him [Charlie Smith interrupts]

Charlie Smith: With him

Elmer Sparks: Yeah, you just went ahead a working huh?

Charlie Smith: [mumbles] When they freed the colored, we just stay. The man would. [clears his voice] When they freed the colored, they, they bought the whole state of Louisiana and give it over to the colored people for their territory to make their laws and rules. And the colored people sold their rights. All that ??? and property, anything, they have to get it approved by the white. Now, that's the way it was done. They ain't got no, can't make no laws, can't make no rules. If they make them, the white let them have it. They sold out.

Elmer Sparks: Now after he died down then, where did you go then?

Charlie Smith: After who died?

Elmer Sparks: After this Charlie Smith.

Charlie Smith: He ain't dead.

Elmer Sparks: Well I mean the one [*Charlie Smith interrupts*]

Charlie Smith: Oh, he dead all right, but where I went, I went, he sold the colored folks. After free, after he sold the colored people. After slavery, slavery time, they sold the colored folks.

Elmer Sparks: Well did you go out in the [*Charlie Smith interrupts*]

Charlie Smith: And, and, and the first war was in the, in the, the North and the South fought a war. The North bought colored people, and the South bought colored folks, and, and in the North they got the, the Southern white folks to look after them and to take care of them. They wouldn't carry them north, say it was too cold for them, and got the southern white folks to look after them. And the Southern white folks was uh, went to mistreating them.

Elmer Sparks: Did, did, did you go out West then or stay there? [*Elmer Sparks and Charlie Smith overlap*]

Charlie Smith: No, I wasn't in the West. I wasn't in the West [*mumbles*]. I was in the West when they freed them.

Elmer Sparks: That's what I mean, after they freed them.

Charlie Smith: Yeah, after they freed them I was in the West. That was when we call old man Charlie. When they went to selling them. He'd object, selling, uh, selling me. Put you up on a block, he'd object. Because he rule that part of Texas. He was a cattleman. And they rule that part of Galveston. He rule that part, and what he, he said, he, he, went. [*Elmer Sparks interrupts then Charlie Smith continues*] And when they want, want to sell me, put me on, on the block, and then he project. And they didn't do it. And he raise me. Carried me to his house. And ame. He name me Charlie. His name was Charlie and he name me Charlie. [*Elmer Sparks and Charlie Smith talk at once and Charlie Smith continues*].

Charlie Smith: That's the name he give me, that's the name. My name what my mother and father name, my name Mitchell, Mitchell Watkins. But he sold me and he got me, and he name me Charlie. That's the name I go in. And when he, he died, he died. And when he died he always teach me and

his children. Didn't teach us one thing, he teach us all. He say, "Anything you got to have, don't never let it give out." He say, "Enjoy your money when you living, because you can't carry none of it with you when you dead. Enjoy your money when you living." He teach us that all the time. And I didn't go to school much. Because I thought I hadn't been, when you [used to ?] toting those pistols and nothing to shoot with, and I was so full of loading my pistols and rifles I had to carry, and, and didn't learn anything else. But I was the only colored boy. All his cowboys was white. We all ate together, we slept together, and everything. Wasn't no difference in the treatment at all. None. Old man Charlie.

Elmer Sparks: Did you, did you move up to Mississippi? Didn't you go to Mississippi? Eventually?

Charlie Smith: Oh, I been all over, all the way down [*Elmer Sparks interrupts Charlie Smith*].

Elmer Sparks: You, you worked, you worked in Mississippi didn't you?

Charlie Smith: I'm a, I'm a state man mister. I work for the United States. I go get bad people. I'm a state man and will as long as I live. Here my folders right here . I'm a state man. I'm the man went with, me and Billy the Kid, the man went and got the man kill the President. And the state name me. I got three name. The United States, I work for the United States now.

[*Pause*]. Name me "Trigger Kid." Me and Billy the Kid, went and got the man kill the President, went and got him. Had a five hundred dollar reward, anybody go get him. He kill the President. Guiteau killed Garfield. Garfield the first President ever was killed of the United States. And the man killed him name Guiteau and went back over in his state where he come from.

Elmer Sparks: That was Charles Guiteau wasn't it?

Charlie Smith: And when they, put out the five hundred dollar reward anybody would go get him. There was six men right at the line of the states. You had to get your authorities from them to go over there. Everybody go over there and get them five hundred dollars, them mens would kill them. Kill them. [*unintelligible*] They'd kill you. If you go over there and get that man, the man done the killing, he went back in that state because that was the state he was born and raised in. And there's six men right at the line of the United States. You, you, you had to get authorities from them to go any further in that state, state. And they done it, and we, me and Billy the Kid, they sent us over there. This United States name me "Trigger Kid," but that's a name I've hated. I been working for the United, I work for the United States now. If you bad, I get all bad people. That's my job now. White or black. If you be do the wrong thing, and they send me after you, only reason I won't get you, I won't see you. They send us after him. The man kill the President. [*recording stops briefly then interview starts up again*]

Elmer Sparks: You then, you picked some fruit didn't you? You done follow the fruit picking?

Charlie Smith: Oh I've done all kinds.

Elmer Sparks: Yeah, yeah. You

Charlie Smith: Here, right here. Here, here, here's, here my picture. Me and this man, that's my, my picture, and that's my age, and this *[unintelligible]*. That's a white man. Me and him was the two oldest people in the world at that time. I was standing at the County Court *[unintelligible]*. There it is right there. And I, I, I, was picking fruit. *[unintelligible]* Yeah. *[Elmer Sparks and Charlie Smith overlap]*

Elmer Sparks: They told me you, they told me you were a picking fruit when you was a hundred and thirteen. Is that right?

Charlie Smith: Oh right, don't you see?

Elmer Sparks: Uh, I see.

Charlie Smith: That's it. That's if I tell folks that, that's the reason the state printed and sent to me to show people.

Elmer Sparks: Yeah.

Charlie Smith: In United States. I might be work for the United States now. I'm a state man. I work for the United States. I go get bad people. White or black. Don't care how old, who you is. If I got, if you do the wrong thing I go, I'm a United States man as long as I live.

Elmer Sparks: Uh, were you, uh, interviewed by Robert Ripley? Do you remember that, Robert Ripley?

Charlie Smith: Robert ???.

Elmer Sparks: Ripley. He's right there. That's *[unintelligible]*.

Charlie Smith: Well I remember all, all bad people. I remember them white or black.

Elmer Sparks: This Ripley's the man you're pictured with there Charlie.

Charlie Smith: Yeah, yeah. Yeah that's him. That's the reason I carry it. I show it to people. Me and this man was the two oldest people in the world, and required us to meet. That's a white man. And

the state name me "Trigger Kid." Me and Billy the Kid went and got the man kill the President then. Guiteau killed Garfield. Garfield was the President of the United States.

Elmer Sparks: He, he, he, he would know, and I've read about it.

Charlie Smith: And, and, and we were, he killed him. Guiteau. Killed Garfield. And, uh, and uh, everybody go over there to get him, for them five hundred dollars, they kill them. There was six men right at the line of the states. And then everybody go over there to get the man what kill, killed the President. That's what state he was raised in, the man done the killing. He'd go back in that state. See, that's the state he was born and raised in.

Elmer Sparks: Do you remember what state that was Charlie?

Charlie Smith: Where?

Elmer Sparks: The state where this, where this Garfield went back in, Guiteau.

Charlie Smith: Yeah, I don't know. I don't remember because I forgot it now. But I

know he went back in the [*Elmer Sparks interrupts*]

Elmer Sparks: [*unintelligible - names states*]

Charlie Smith: Yeah, yeah. He went, went back in the state he was, he was born and raised in. And the, when he got to, to kill the man, he went back in that state. Well there was six mens there at the line, at uh Baltimore. Six men was killing everybody going there to get him, after this man went down to kill him. Guiteau killed Garfield. Garfield is the first President ever was kill of the United States.

Elmer Sparks: They wrote a book about it, you know.

Charlie Smith: And Guiteau killed him and went back in that state what he was born and raised in. And anybody that went there over there to get him, them six mens was there at the line, they'd, they'd kill them. And they killed them, and they sent me and Billy the Kid. The state name me "Trigger Kid," and Billy the Kid, that was a white man. We went over there, just ride up there, and, said, "Hi, where you going?" They bring them six men. Call them six mens hooking bulls. They had to get authorities from them to go any further in that state. "Where you going?" "Going across the desert." "All right, you get authority form us. You got authority?" So we cuss. Say, "We got authority. We got authority from the United States." Showed them this, "Here it is. And here our, here our god, and here our goddamn authorities." that's what we told to them six men. Call them six men hooking

bulls. We ride on. "All right, go ahead!" Said, "We damn sure going." Ride on off. Got to the camp, with a guard. Told us they want to search. Guards all come to, guards that, that was there. "Y'all come by the hooking bulls?" We cuss. Say, "We come by some damn bull or another." "Well you got authorities from the hooking bull to search. The boss of the camp ain't here. [*Elmer Sparks talks in the background*] The boss of the camp ain't here." He said, "If you want to search, the boss of the camp ain't here, and the guards was there." [*Elmer Sparks talks in the background*] The guards was there. [*unintelligible*].

Elmer Sparks: Well, uh, coming back to the uh, modern day, or later. Did the Social Security people, did they come see you?

Charlie Smith: Social Security?

Elmer Sparks: Yeah.

Charlie Smith: Yeah.

Elmer Sparks: They did. And, you remember how old you were then?

Charlie Smith: The man raised me, yeah, the man raised me. The man that raised me name, give me the name I got. Charlie Smith.

Elmer Sparks: Well I mean [*Charlie Smith interrupts*]

Charlie Smith: I was raised in Galveston, Texas.

Elmer Sparks: Well I mean later, later, then uh, uh. Were you about a hundred and thirteen when they Social Security people come and say [*Charlie Smith interrupts*]

Charlie Smith: [*Charlie Smith is quite irritated here*] Well don't you, I done show it to you. There it is, down there.

Elmer Sparks: That's what I'm trying, that's what I'm trying to say. [*Elmer Sparks and Charlie Smith overlap*]

Charlie Smith: I done showed it to you.

Elmer Sparks: And you're not [*Charlie Smith interrupts*]

Charlie Smith: Keep on asking them question, that's the reason I showed it to you. I show it to you. My age, yeah, I'm older now than I was then. I'm older now. I'm a hundred and forty-four, last, last year, fourth of July. A hundred and forty-four years old now. My birthday, I gets a birthday card, I'm a hundred and forty-four last fourth day of July, last year. I'm a hundred and forty-four.

Elmer Sparks: And you don't, you don't wear glasses.

Charlie Smith: No, I ain't never wore none.

Elmer Sparks: And you don't wear a hearing aid, is that it?

Charlie Smith: I got hearing. I hear just as good now as I ever been hearing.

Elmer Sparks: Oh, I believe that.

Charlie Smith: I can see good as I ever have. The United States takes care of me. The United States. If I, if they send me direction, only reason I don't get you, I don't see you. I'm the man straightened up [*unintelligible, a place*]. Sent me there. Colored people didn't pass through there. You could go up-town but you couldn't stay in [*unintelligible*]. I straighten it up. The state sent me there to straighten it. Now the colored people own property there. Right between here and [*unintelligible - place*]. The colored porter couldn't get off the train there. White folks didn't allow him to get off the [train?] colored porter on the train couldn't get off there. The state sent me there, to straighten it up. I straightened it so the colored folks can get off there. Now colored, colored people own, own property in, in [*unintelligible - place*]. I had to go to near [*unintelligible - place*]. Sign was printed up there right at the depot. What the sign say, "Read Nigger And Run. That what was on the sign. The state sent me there. Say, "Go tear that sign down." Said, "If you need any help, let us know that." I went there. The sign was right up there, right at the depot. Said, "Read Nigger And Run." He say, he ask me, "You, you got authority?" I said, "Yeah. I got authority." "Present your authorities." "Here my goddamn authorities, and here my help. These forty-fives." I tore it down. At, at, at [*unintelligible - place*]. I tore it down. Anywhere the states tell me to go and do, I does it. Now. Always did ever since I been working for the ???, I been working for the United States a hundred years. But I'm grown older now.

Elmer Sparks: Do you belong to the Mason Lodge?

Charlie Smith: Yes. I was made a Mason. I been, first time I got old enough, I was put in it. The man that raised me put me in the Masons. I been a Mason hundred years. If I wasn't a Mason I couldn't join [*unintelligible*]. And you, and any other man get my age, any, anybody white or black. You can

get too old to join the Masons. You can get too young to join. I, I got old enough, the man put me in the Mason. Old man Charlie. He put me in the Mason. If I weren't one, I couldn't go, that's that's in the ring, but just the set dropped out of it. The square and compass. He dropped that out, out [*Elmer Sparks interrupts*]

Elmer Sparks: Well I'm a Mason.

Charlie Smith: That was this ring that, that the set was in that ring, and it dropped out. I was been a Mason a hundred years. Old man Charlie put me in the Mason. I'm the first colored man ever to be made a Mason in the United States, in Louisville. [*Elmer Sparks and Charlie Smith overlap*] If I weren't nary one, not only me, nobody my age. You can get too old to join the Mason. And you can get too young to join the Mason. If I weren't nary one now, I couldn't be, because I'm too old. And anybody my age, white or black, you can't join the Masons you that age. I know it. I been a Mason a hundred year. I know Mason.

Elmer Sparks: And you're speaking of cowboys, we're, we're both cowboys. We're right out of the [*Charlie Smith interrupts*]

Charlie Smith: Oh yeah, I'm the only colored cowboy old man Charlie had. He had plenty cowboys, but I was the only one he had. He raise me.

Elmer Sparks: How many were there in your family originally?

Charlie Smith: Oh in my, my family?

Elmer Sparks: Yeah.

Charlie Smith: Oh do [*Elmer Sparks interrupts*]

Elmer Sparks: Your mother and your children and your sisters.

Charlie Smith: I, I didn't have but uh, one brother and two sisters, three sisters with the baby sister. My two oldest sisters was, uh, one of them was name, one of them was, both of them was married all right. My oldest one, my baby sister, she just a little old kid. She's the baby of all us children. I had one brother. His name was Simon Watkins. My name, what my mama and daddy name me, Mitchell Watkins. The name where, the one that name me, Charlie Smith, that's the white man raised me, in Texas. Charlie Smith. And he treated me just; like he treated his children. In everything. We ate together, slept together. Yeah. And when he died [*slight pause*]

Elmer Sparks: Well, uh

Charlie Smith: People bragged on preachers. So good and so honest and all like that. When he died, I give them the money, to a preacher, to preacher [*i.e., people*] bragged on preachers. I give my money to preachers because I, I didn't want to take it myself. All the cowboys toted it, wore boots and what money they, old man Charlie didn't keep for us, we kept it ourselves in our boots. And I was the only colored cowboy. We all ride together. We all ate together. And not at one time, all the time. And I was treated just like one of the white.

Elmer Sparks: Did you, did you, were, see, you worked in, in Mississippi at one time did you?

Charlie Smith: Oh yeah. I worked everywhere I went. I, when they took that picture there was took, I was standing right down over there over there toward Auburndale. When that picture was took. [*Elmer Sparks and Charlie Smith overlap*] Sent us, sent us to Denver, Colorado.

Elmer Sparks: Is that I wonder if we haven't about covered this, and we'll take some pictures. That all right? And so, thank you and we will take some pictures here.

END OF TAPE